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ABSTRACT

Certain scholars in anthropology and education have recently suggested as an approach to combat school failure for minority students the concept of cultural congruence--the idea that learning is best accomplished in classrooms compatible with the cultural context of the communities they are supposed to serve. Although this concept is yet to be fully articulated as theory or extensively realized in practice, it has already received considerable criticism for "blaming the victim," for denying the possibility of "breaking with experience," and for being too difficult for practicing teachers to apply. This paper attempts to clarify just what is meant by cultural congruence, and argues that most of these criticisms assume a far more total merger of community and school than the modest and limited model favored by proponents of cultural congruence, who are simply talking about minimizing differences in speaking and social interactional styles in the classroom. In this limited form, cultural congruence can be a useful addition to educators' repertoire for dealing with minority education. A six-page list of references is included. (Author/BJV)

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WHAT IS CULTURAL CONGRUENCE, AND WHY ARE THEY SAYING SUCH TERRIBLE THINGS ABOUT IT?

Eliot A. Singer

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Abstract

Certain scholars in anthropology and education have recently suggested as an approach to school failure for minority students the concept of cultural congruence--the idea that learning is best accomplished in classrooms compatible with the cultural context of the communities they are supposed to serve. Although this concept is yet to be fully articulated as theory or extensively realized in practice, it has already received considerable criticism for "blaming the victim," for denying the possibility of "breaking with experience," and for being too difficult for practicing teachers to apply. This paper attempts to clarify just what is meant by cultural congruence, and argues that most of these criticisms assume a far more total merger of community and school than the modest and limited model favored by proponents of cultural congruence, who are simply talking about minimizing differences in ways of speaking and social interactional styles in the classroom. In this limited form, cultural congruence can be a useful addition to educators' repertoire for dealing with minority schooling.

WHAT IS CULTURAL CONGRUENCE, AND WHY ARE THEY SAYING SUCH TERRIBLE THINGS ABOUT IT?[1]

Eliot A. Singer[2]

What Cultural Congruence Is, and Is Not

Given a vehement political climate calling for a return to "traditional American values" and an educational reform movement emphasizing "basic skills," "cultural literacy," and "uniform standards," it is hardly surprising that proposals for pluralism and local relevance are liable to attack. Cultural congruence--the idea that learning is best accomplished in classrooms compatible with the cultural context of the communities they are supposed to serve--makes an easy target. As yet to be fully articulated as a concept or extensively realized in practice (Cazden, 1983), cultural congruence is at a stage of development where it needs legitimate, modest, constructive criticism. However, exaggerated critiques such as that of Zeuli and Floden (1987), whatever their authors' intent,[3] are too easily read as legitimizing rejection, not just refinement, of culturally sensitive approaches to minority education. Such critiques demand rebuttal; however, in this paper, I hope to go beyond merely pointing out the flaws in their argument so as to offer some clarifications of the real issues pertinent to cultural congruence.

Cultural congruence is an inherently moderate pedagogical strategy that accepts that the goal of educating minority students is to train individuals in those skills needed to succeed in mainstream society. Its proponents argue that this goal can best be achieved when students feel comfortable because their classrooms correspond to the learning environments of the cultural communities from which they come. The idea is to identify cultural differences that are obstacles to learning in standardized classrooms, and then to use this information to change classroom instruction and management to fit better with students' cultural standards and expectations.

While most of its supporters explicitly or implicitly place the blame for minority school failure in the political and economic inequities of society at large, cultural congruence does not in itself challenge existing institutions. It makes no attempt to deal with broader, and probably more significant, issues for minority education: local control and autonomy (Schierbeck, 1971); a paucity of minority teachers, administrators, and planners (Esmailka, 1987; Flying Earth & Chavers, 1984); inferior economic resources (Schierbeck, 1971); blatant racism; or the conscious culturo-political choice that school failure is for many minority drop-outs (Ogbu, 1982, 1987). Nor does it entail the more radical vision, favored by some minority educators, that would create new pedagogies with alternative curriculum, goals, expectations, and definitions of excellence (McQuiston & Brod, 1984; Whiteman, 1984). Proponents of cultural congruence merely hope to provide a modest means to help teachers from the dominant culture adapt to working with minority students and, most importantly, in minority communities. Indeed, because it is such a moderate approach, and because it focuses on incongruities as obstacles to school success, cultural congruence (despite the emphasis on changing educators' rather than children's behaviors) can be seen as "blaming the victim," a point made by Kleinfeld (1983) who fears that "cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure" (p. 283).

Culture is a complex notion which has been hotly debated within the field of anthropology for the last hundred years. Proponents of cultural congruence in the field of education, however, have failed to explain adequately to their colleagues not privy to anthropological debate which concept of culture they represent; nor have they clearly specified with what aspects of culture they want classrooms to be congruent. This enables critics, such as Zeuli and

Floden (1987), to envision "making classroom communication fit with students' specific backgrounds," and "making curriculum more continuous with students' cultural backgrounds" (p. 1) as something far more extensive than proponents of cultural congruence would intend.

Although educational ethnography derives from a variety of paradigms (Jacob, 1987), actual studies of cultural incongruities have almost exclusively emerged from a theoretical perspective which defines culture as shared rules for appropriate behavior in a community.[4] This theory of culture, developed by Goodenough (1965, 1970, 1981) and others to deal with the study of social organization, has provided the framework for micro-analytic research on social interaction (Goffman, 1967, 1974) and ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974), which in turn has provided the basis for the notion of cultural congruence. This is a highly formalist theory of culture--which may be why it appeals to ethnographic researchers in education who are often accused of mysticism by their positivist colleagues--that is very powerful in describing what one needs to know in order to behave competently in a cultural community. However, except in a few abstract formulations that recognize the significance of culturally distinct "definitions of honesty, seriousness of purpose, respect, initiative, achievement, kindliness, [or] reasonableness" (Erickson 1986, p. 135), this theory ignores such broader aspects of culture as traditions, existential axioms, root metaphors, beliefs, attitudes, world view, and values.

That most students of cultural incongruities have chosen to use this limited formalist concept of culture in no way diminishes the significance of their findings for classroom management and instruction. There are indeed considerable differences between cultures as to how one appropriately conducts oneself in interacting and communicating with other people: How one gets the

floor in conversation, how one shows attention or respect, how one makes a point or indicates concurrence or disagreement, how one asserts oneself or defers to others, how one indicates approval or disapproval--all of these very basic aspects of classroom life vary from culture to culture. So too do the ways in which adults "manage" the behavior and learning of children. When a child has to change his or her rules for interaction, upon entering a school setting that operates according to the standardized norms of the dominant culture, the result is likely to be an uncomfortable learning environment. Although minority children are sometimes able "to catch on to white teachers's communicative codes" (Kleinfeld, 1983, p. 286) or mimic acceptable forms (Michaels, 1986),[5] the feeling of alienation when placed in a foreign environment, the sheer exhaustion of trying to behave appropriately (even when, in principle, one knows how) is very real, perhaps most especially for those aspects of culture that we all take so much for granted they seem invisible (Philips, 1983). The problem may be less miscommunication, as it is often represented, than discomfort (students may know that they are supposed to speak out in front of the class but still feel awkward doing so) but it is uncomfortable enough going to school without also having to follow alien norms.[6]

Kleinfeld (1983) notes that some "experienced teachers doubt whether cultural differences in pause time cause any serious problem in communication" (p. 286) but there is good, well documented evidence that similar kinds of differences in cultural norms do. The Kamehameha Project in Hawaii (Au & Jordan, 1981; Au & Mason, 1983; Cazden et al., 1981; Watson-Gegeo & Boggs, 1977) has found that teacher controlled individual turn taking in reading lessons is at odds with the more interactive approach of traditional story telling and that the organization of classroom recitations reminds students of

"scolding events" at home. Erickson (1979) has found that differences between the way black students and white authorities indicate comprehension during "gatekeeping" encounters can lead to hard feelings and loss of opportunity. On the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon, Philips (1983) has found that praise and punishment are meted out to children as a group in the Indian community, rather than to individuals as it is in standardized classrooms; that advice at home is not coercive as it is in teacher/student interactions; and that visual, not auditory, signals are paramount for gaining attention. In Ontario, Erickson and Mohatt (1982) have found that Odawa Indian students dislike being "spotlighted" for answering content questions. And, in both Alberta and Alaska, Scollon and Scollon (1979, 1981) have found that Athabaskan Indians think of speech as a privilege of intimacy, and, hence, prefer to speak little, if at all, in contexts such as schools where some of the listeners are not intimates.[7]

That different rules for microbehaviors are significant should make good common sense to anyone who, even within mainstream culture, has moved from place to place. Think of the frustration, say, of a midwesterner trying to compete for service in Harvard Square or of a New Yorker waiting for what may seem an eternity to complete a transaction in Berkeley. I'm a nervous wreck every time I go to Ann Arbor because of what I regard as the total illogic of its four-way stop signs. Woody Allen provides a revealing parody of such discomfort when visiting Diane Keaton's small town Wisconsin family in Annie Hall. If these kinds of experiences of difference can drive sophisticated, even anthropologically trained, adults to distraction, we ought not to dismiss as trivial, or as easily gotten used to and overcome, even small cultural differences in the classroom.

Nonetheless, it must be recognized that, in paying special attention to microscopic rules for appropriate behavior in classrooms, educational ethnographers have ignored broader aspects of cultural difference which may have far greater, though perhaps more difficult, implications for school success. Different cultures have different beliefs about the value of learning, about the empirical basis or sources for knowing, and about the way to knowledge. Some cultures may stress learning for its own sake, while others may see schooling as a means towards an end; the consequences of this difference for education may be enormous. Children from cultures that favor cooperation over competition are likely to be disturbed by school environments with differential testing and groupings. What are the educational implications of a traditional belief that knowledge is a secret form of power, as potentially malevolent as it is potentially beneficial, which involves acquiring control over supernatural sources through enormous self-deprivation? Such cultural beliefs and values have a potential impact for schooling that is mind-boggling. However their potential for misconstrual, even for racist misinterpretation, is equally mind-boggling. How can we talk about a cultural belief that doing better in school than one's peers is a form of social betrayal, without somehow implying that the students holding such a belief are causing their own failure? While it may be appropriate for minority educators to call for creating schools as institutions within traditional societies that are compatible with alternative world views and values (Flying Earth & Chavers, 1984; McQuiston & Brod, 1984; Whiteman, 1984), ethnographers who point to such beliefs as impediments to mainstream education almost inevitably risk the accusation of "blaming the victim."

For field researchers who spend extensive time in minority communities, cultural imperialism is a very real issue. Educating students to succeed in

the mainstream involves imposing the dominant culture's ideas of which knowledge is important on minority cultures, and this imposition is in direct contradiction to the anthropological credo of cultural relativism. By paying attention to cultural minutia, rather than deeper cultural constructs, ethnographers are able to minimize this contradiction. It is relatively safe to argue that educators need to take into account cultural differences in microscopic rules for social interaction; no one except a true cultural imperialist would claim that raising hands is an inherently better way for organizing participation than is prolonged pauses with subtle signals for attention. It is far more dangerous to document differences in beliefs or attitudes about schooling that may be obstacles to school success. By focusing on microbehaviors, even while recognizing that they are embedded in broader cultural complexes, proponents of cultural congruence, perhaps wisely, have limited the scope--and probably the potential for misuse--of discussion of cultural differences for education.

It is against this limited form of cultural congruence that critics must address themselves. No one is claiming that cultural differences, in themselves, cause school failure. All proponents of cultural congruence are arguing is that, if differences could be minimized without in some other way damaging children's education, minority students would find it easier to go to school. The differences being talked about are simply small cultural details. If, in excitement over their own research, ethnographers have overemphasized the importance or scope of their findings, then Kleinfeld (1983) is right to be concerned that the significance of cultural differences as contributing factors to minority school failure can be, and in some cases has been, overblown. When others argue that proponents of cultural congruence are ignoring internal and external socioeconomic and political forces (Ogbu,

1982), that some ethnic minorities succeed in schools despite cultural differences (Ogbu 1987), or that that students are not unable but unwilling to adapt to mainstream classroom culture (McDermott & Gospodinoff 1981), they are challenging cultural congruence as it is actually researched and practiced.[8] However, when Zeuli and Floden (1987), try to make a "common sense argument that [mistaken application] is plausible and should therefore be guarded against" (p. 5), and try to extrapolate from theoretical arguments made more carefully elsewhere (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, 1987a), they must make assumptions about the extent of what cultural congruence entails which are at odds with its limited ambitions.

Cultural Congruence and Breaking with Experience

Zeuli and Floden (1987) take their critique from two more generic issues for teacher education: that, in attempting to make education more "relevant" and "meaningful" for students, schools may be losing their necessary divaricating functions as academic institutions (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983; Floden & Buchmann, 1984; Floden, Buchmann & Schwille, 1987a), and that the road from research to classroom practice, by way of teacher education, is a bumpy one (Buchmann, 1984, 1987). These are serious concerns, and at first glance would seem quite pertinent to a concept that advocates having teachers adapt their classrooms to local circumstances. Under closer scrutiny, however, the former can be shown to be largely irrelevant to cultural congruence as actually constituted, while the latter suggests difficulties that are far more surmountable than the critics would suppose.

In a series of recent articles (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983; Floden & Buchmann, 1984; Floden, Buchmann & Schwille, 1987a) concerning the advisability of relying on experience for teaching subject matter, notably mathematics and science, where there is a disjunction between everyday

knowledge and academic thinking, it has been theorized that conceptual learning requires "breaks with everyday modes of experience" (Zeuli & Floden, 1987, p. 12). Everyday life, it is argued, sets up powerful and emotionally charged notions of what reality is, and it takes a series of "salutory shocks" to challenge this reality and allow for academic and intellectual growth. By extension, Zeuli and Floden suggest that, if schools match "content and instructional methods . . . to students' cultural backgrounds" they may not provide contexts sufficiently "distinct from everyday learning" (p. 12) to foster the formation of new concepts.

Most students of culture would agree that experience, or "common sense," is a cultural system of considerable strength and tenacity (Douglas, 1975; Geertz, 1975). They also would recognize the necessity of "breaks" from everyday life for analytical reflection on cultural systems--hence the emphasis on "culture shock" and "making the familiar strange" in ethnographic research. But, this learning theory does not in itself constitute a critique: It is perfectly plausible to create a modicum of cultural congruence in classrooms, and still institutionalize "breaks" in school. Moreover, traditional ways of "breaking with experience" may provide models for "breaks" in school contexts.

Zeuli and Floden's (1987) argument deconstructs into three separate parts: that schools should be institutionally distinct from other aspects of social life, that instructional practices should be different from ways of teaching in the community, and that academic content should be removed from experiential knowledge. Although only the second of these points speaks to anything proponents of cultural congruence are currently advocating, since the other issues raised may be relevant to some broader notion of cultural congruence in the future, they also need to be considered here.

Zeuli and Floden (1987) assert that schools cannot afford to be culturally congruent because they are unique as social institutions in being able to reflect upon everyday life. "Schools . . . are places set apart. If family, job, church or other social institutions were to take responsibility for developing children's powers to break with everyday experience, the school's role would be less important. Currently no other institution takes that responsibility" (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, 1987, pp. 485-486).

Diametrically opposed to this assertion, however, is extensive recent scholarship in the what Geertz (1980) calls "blurred genres" of literary theory, symbolic anthropology, and folkloristics. This scholarship--undertaken from a rival perspective to Goodenough's (1965, 1970, 1981)--takes culture to be interpretations rather than norms, and looks precisely at the way symbolic forms break with everyday life to reflect upon the structure of socially constructed concepts. Research has consistently shown that, while people are indeed symbolically indoctrinated into accepting culturally specific interpretations of and conventions for everyday life as "uniquely real" (Geertz, 1966), cultures also provide texts and contexts for systematically breaking with the boundaries of ordinary experience (Geertz, 1972; Turner, 1974).

The notion of experience, itself, as theorized by Dewey (1934, 1938) or Schutz (1962), has been undergoing considerable revision from this perspective (Turner, 1986). Scholars point out, for instance, that during the course of "experience" one may have "an experience" which forces one to reconsider precedent knowledge (Abrahams, 1986), and that there is an unending dialectic between experience and expressions which hold a "broken mirror" up to nature (Bruner, 1986; Turner, 1986). Art, literature, ritual, festival, play, and other cultural institutions are carefully "set apart" for exploring

possibilities (Bateson, 1972; Huizinga, 1957) and for reflecting back upon the underlying arbitrariness of culturally prescribed rules and meanings. Rites of reversal (Babcock, 1978; Bateson, 1958), rites of passage (Turner, 1969), carnival (Bakhtin, 1968), circus (Bouissac, 1976), clowning (Makarius, 1970; Ortiz, 1971), and other forms of symbolic inversion and transversion are common to traditional societies, as is the mythological figure of the trickster, that perversely popular character who insists on breaking every available cultural norm (Babcock, 1975) and who is stubbornly unable to accept conventional meanings (Singer, 1987). These forms of non-sense are not only contexts for misbehavior or opportunities for imagination; they are occasions whose symbolic disorder or "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969, 1974) functions precisely to call into question the everyday experience of order and the concepts it engenders. During the "vision quest," an institution traditional among many American Indian groups, for instance, those seeking knowledge explicitly attempt to break from the boundaries of everyday experience, by great physical and mental privation, in order to achieve understandings that transcend the concepts of ordinary reality. Schools would never dare undertake breaks with experience so radical.

Children, in particular, are regularly engaged in exploring the limits of experience in their play. Riddling, a dominant form of children's speech play (Krishenblatt-Gimblett, 1976), has been shown to facilitate social and conceptual development by reflecting upon the formal and social constraints of language (McDowell, 1979; Sutton-Smith, 1976). Children are fascinated with tricksters (Abrams & Sutton-Smith, 1977) and with fantasy and make-believe in general (Bettleheim, 1977; Egan, 1987). Students may turn school itself into "anti-structure" (McLaren, 1986), and symbolically transform educational experience, as through such pervasive children's verse as "Mine eyes have seen

the glory of the burning of the school/ We have cheated all the teachers/ We have broken every rule."

It is not my intent to claim that the ways in which traditional and contemporary symbolic forms, including children's play, break with everyday experience are necessarily isomorphic with the process for conceptual discontinuities Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille (1987a) are advocating for schools. But, as Egan (1987) has already suggested, "If the topic is breaking with experience then perhaps something may be learned from the vigorous everyday mental activity of children in which breaks with everyday experience are commonplace" (p. 511). The force of so much of the theoretical discussion of and empirical research into symbolic forms is so explicitly concerned with how they go beyond mere escape to become potential sources for intellectual transformation, that it cannot be dismissed with comments like, "Imagination breaks with the everyday world, yet does not thereby render experience lifeless" (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille, 1987b, p. 515); it is unlikely that, when schools challenge everyday conceptions, they "render experience lifeless" either.[9] The point is that the scholarship on how symbolic forms break with experience, which has been undertaken by some of the most influential thinkers of our time, is so similar to what proponents of schools' breaking with everyday experience are suggesting, that they must take it seriously into account, and, if not adapt it to their own purposes, at least convincingly demonstrate how what they are talking about is different. Certainly, at this time, they cannot proclaim a simple dichotomy between communities and schools as contexts for "breaking with experience" and then use this dichotomy to argue against cultural congruence.

Anyway, this notion of schools as places for breaking with experience is ironic in light of the radical critique of them as institutions that replicate

established social divisions and ideologies. Classrooms are hardly places of intellectual turmoil, with children's conceptions being challenged and instructional methods in flux. Descriptions of school life consistently show it to be highly routinized and far more concerned with maintaining order than with providing opportunities for intellectually enhancing disorder. While classrooms may differ from home or community in their social norms and instructional methods, they themselves produce stable, indeed often rigid, contexts for learning. The everyday experience of classroom rules and routines is far more limiting to "breaks" than anything cultural congruence might ever entail. While theorists may have an ideal for a more anarchic form of schooling, it is inappropriate to criticize cultural congruence for aiming towards greater coherence in real schools.

Even if schools really were unique social institutions for breaking from everyday experience, questions remain as to how much and in what ways instructional methods need to be distinct from home and community modes of learning to foster conceptual change. Remember that proponents of cultural congruence are mostly talking about creating some compatibility between community and school in patterns of social interaction and communication! Is it necessary, for instance, that a teacher publicly scold a child for a wrong answer for that child to learn a new concept in mathematics? Is individual turn taking absolutely necessary for learning to read? The critics aren't sufficiently specific as to what instructional methods they are concerned about to make much of a case. However much a classroom may attempt cultural congruence, it will always remain an institution tremendously different from others in a community (Esmailka, 1987), and, unless critics are able to demonstrate how particular culturally congruent instructional practices deny

the possibility of conceptual growth, then this basic distinctiveness should suffice as a break from everyday experience.

A more plausible case has been made for the need to break from everyday experience in teaching content. Floden, Buchman, and Schwille (1987a) argue that "instruction should not rely on learning tied to the local context, but should rather draw more from material set in a larger context" (p. 492). But how much and what kind of localized content is too much? What are the areas of school content in which conceptions fostered by everyday experience in traditional communities are such that attempts at culturally congruent curriculum would interfere with learning academically "correct" concepts? Again, specifics are needed to make a case. Curriculum has not been a major topic of discussion by advocates of cultural congruence, but proposals for cultural relevance would seem fairly modest (Butterfield, 1983). To suggest that students be taught to read using some written materials which utilize traditional stories or refer to local practices does not preclude students from also reading "the classics." To invent math problems about traditional hunting does not mean that students cannot also do problems about space travel. Sometimes it is the wider context which provides culturally relevant material: Paul Ongtooguk, an Eskimo who taught high school in rural Alaska, used Irish history to demonstrate to his students that the denigration of Indians and Eskimos had parallels elsewhere. Cultural congruence is a matter of degree, and as long as no one is arguing for limiting curriculum for students from minority cultures to localized materials, its advocates cannot be fairly criticized for ignoring a wider context.

The issue for cultural congruence of schools breaking with everyday experience, then, would seem limited to precisely those few situations where there is a direct contradiction between academic concepts and culturally based

knowledge. Such situations are likely to be infrequent and limited to those grades after the emphasis of schooling turns from basic skills to content. And when traditional beliefs do come in conflict with academic thought (as when I used to teach human evolution to fundamentalists), adequate attention to the cultural context may be essential for effective teaching.

Consider the hypothetical, but potentially very real, problem of trying to teach biology in a culture with its own well established systems for categorizing plants and animals, such as that of the Karam of Highland, New Guinea, in which the cassowary, an ostrich-like creature, is not a bird (Bulmer, 1967). Assuming that, in order to learn about evolution, genetics, and so on, it is necessary to use Linnaean classification, this traditional system poses difficulties. Rather than suggesting that Linnaeus be abandoned, what those attuned to culture would insist on is that instructors be sensitive to the significance of the cassowary to the Karam. Its "misclassification" (because it does not fly, lacks plumes, is large, and has leg bones resembling humans) is not a simple "misconception in science"; it is a classification of deep symbolic meaning for Karam social structure, cosmology, and notions of humanity. In this case, the culturally congruent teaching of biology would not entail substituting traditional thought for academic learning, but would involve finding some way of presenting the Linnaean concept without disrupting deeply rooted cultural patterns.

Far more important for minority education than these relatively rare occasions when traditional knowledge is an obstacle to learning academic concepts are those when schools teach (or fail to challenge) misconceptions about minority society, history, and literature. It is for this reason, and not to limit minority students' range of learning, that American Indian educators are so concerned that teachers working in Indian communities should

be required to take courses in Native American Studies (Dorris, 1984). Contemporary social studies and history text books continue to grossly underplay the historical significance of minority groups, and to describe them in highly inaccurate fashion (Costo, 1982):

> Most high school and college textbooks give little space to the aspects of history dealing with Indians, and the small amount of coverage is extremely culturally biased. Indian males are refered to as "bucks" or as "warriors," seldom as men. Indian women are refered to often as "squaws," seldom as women. Native religion is labelled superstition. Custer's defeat was a "massacre," while a battle in which Indians lost was a "victory." (Flying Earth & Chaver, 1984. p. 43)

Textbook versions of American Indian myths and legends regularly pass off the work of non-Indian authors or extensive reworkings of authentic tales that totally misrepresent the moral, social, artistic, and intellectual significances of native literatures, as academically sanctioned knowledge (Singer, in press). In these cases, it is communities' traditions which may provide the necessary break with "school knowledge" to alleviate academic misconceptions.

In sum, the theoretical concern that schools must break from everyday experience and provide curriculum outside the context of community life is of little relevance to the issue of cultural congruence. Critics underestimate the capacity of everyday life for providing its own opportunities for reflection and are overoptimistic about the propensities of schools for doing so. Unless they assume that cultural congruence involves extensive revisions of instructional practice such that classrooms will virtually replicate the social norms of homes and communities, there will be more than enough differentiation to enable conceptual growth; proponents, of course, are advocating only minor changes. Critics worry that culturally congruent curriculum will replace content about the world at large, when no one is suggesting using more than a modicum of localized materials. And they

envision a substitution of traditional wisdom for academic knowledge, though the two are rarely at odds, and, when they are, by far the most serious conflicts are those where it is the educational system that has the misconceptions.

Cultural Congruence and Equal Opportunity

By dwelling on how cultural congruence might theoretically preclude breaks from everyday life, the critics have eschewed a far more relevant issue. The practical question is not whether cultural congruence may interfere with academic learning, but whether there is some point at which cultural congruence becomes so great in extent or duration that it hinders the ability of students to succeed in mainstream society. Obviously, this would be so for a curriculum that taught traditional skills instead of academic or standard vocational subject matter--as one Alaskan chief put it, "I never saw an ad in the Help Wanted section looking for a beader" (Esmailka, 1987). But the problem may also exist for social interaction and communication, the topics of most research on cultural incongruities.

There is much to be learned from the debate over "Black English Vernacular." When it was recognized that BEV was not "bad English," but a language with its own internally consistent phonemics, syntax, and lexicon, and that black students, who were being taught reading, writing, and arithmetic in Standard English, were being placed at a disadvantage by being forced to learn basic skills in what amounted to a foreign language (Dillard, 1972; Labov, 1972), it was proposed that certain instruction be given in BEV. This proposal, however, produced a backlash not just from conservatives, but from educators within the black community who argued that by not being required to use Standard English in school, minority students would be deprived of the linguistic skills necessary for success in the outside

economic world where, after all, however unfairly, Standard English remained the sole acceptable means of communication (Labov, 1982; McCrum, Cran & MacNeil, 1986; Smitherman, 1981).

Advocates of cultural congruence do need to consider the possibility that culturally congruent classroom commmunication might hinder students' learning of the interactive skills necessary for success in mainstream society. That cultural differences in microscopic aspects of communication can become obstacles in employment and career gatekeeping encounters has been dramatically demonstrated by Erickson (1979). Though those intent on not "blaming the victim" would, of course, prefer that gatekeepers learn to accommodate cultural differences, given inequality in power relationships it is more likely that it will remain minorities who have to adapt. And, even if teachers learn to accomplish cultural congruence, there will be few employers attuned to the subtleties of cultural incongruities in social interaction.

As Philips (1972) notes, the real key is choice:

> If, the people's main concern is to enable Indian children to compete successfully with non-Indians, and so have the <u>choice</u> of access to the modes of interaction and life-styles of non-Indians, then there should be a conscious effort made by schools to teach the mode of appropriate verbal participation that prevails in non-Indian classrooms (p. 392).

What knowledge of cultural differences does, is provide the possibility of choice. It enables educators to choose between or combine culturally congruent and <u>consciously</u> incongruent strategies. The problem, then, becomes one of balance and timing: when to take advantage of cultural congruence, when to teach mainstream communications skills.

Making selective use of cultural congruence when things go wrong may help create harmony in the classroom without eliminating the value of experience in the dominant cultural mode. Some native teachers seem quite adept at switching between cultural congruence and incongruence: Campbell (1986)

describes how Filipinos will sometimes turn to speaking Tagalog, while teaching math in English, when obstacles to instruction arise; Ongtooguk notes similar code switching between "Village" and standard English in Alaska. It may be that cultural congruence is most important in the early grades when children are learning how to go to school, in which case mainstream ways of teaching and social interaction skills could gradually be introduced in later grades. However, the facility of young children in picking up foreign languages may suggest that early grades are the place to provide conscious instruction in mainstream communication. But even in consciously teaching the communicative and interactive codes of the dominant society, cultural congruence may play a role: Minority students in Philadelphia, for instance, have been drilled in Standard English with the help of "rap" (McCrum, Cran, & MacNeil, 1986, p. 232).

Precisely how to utilize cultural congruence without depriving minority students of the skills necessary for employment is a problem best worked out through extensive practice. And this, of course, requires educating teachers about what they might do, needless to say, not an easy task. But neither is it an impossible one.

Teaching Cultural Congruence

It is, as Buchmann (1984, in press) points out, difficult to educate prospective teachers about research findings. I doubt that any of us, at any level of education, feel particularly comfortable with what our students make of what we teach them. However, given that such misconstrual is almost inevitable, unless we wish to stop teaching research, or even give up teaching altogether, we must, in some existential fashion, go on. An abstract caution that "'tis many a slip twixt cup and lip" is hardly the basis for criticizing a particular research methodology or its findings.

Zeuli and Floden (1987) make the argument that, since it is possible, in the abstract, for prospective teachers to misunderstand cultural congruence, they must be made aware of its dangers. The issue becomes one of warning prospective teachers not to misuse cultural congruence rather than of teaching them how to make thoughtful and careful use of it. The difference is the proverbial one of seeing the glass as half empty instead of half full. Given an audience of educational scholars with little familiarity with cultural research, and their students with even less background in anthropological thought, the half-empty perspective (despite occasional ameliorating comments by the authors) implies that implementing cultural congruence is too difficult to be worth trying.

The critics are quite correct in saying that there is relatively little evidence of successful applications of cultural congruence. Although there has been considerable research demonstrating cultural incongruities in schools, there have been few actual attempts to make teaching culturally congruent and to study the results thereof. As has often been pointed out, until very recently, the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP) in Hawaii is the only extensive example "where ethnographers have stayed to participate in the development of alternative pedagogy that solves, or at least ameliorates" (Cazden et al., 1981, p. 51) problems of cultural incompatibilities between home and school. Other research has suggested that the success of native teachers with native students derives from cultural congruence (Barnhardt, 1982; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Esmailka, 1987), but it is very hard to disassemble these effects from those of other benefits, such as role modeling. Even with KEEP, what caused initial increases in reading scores, cultural congruence or something else (e.g., increased "time on task"), is difficult to determine (Cazden et al., 1981, pp. 27-28).

But lack of evidence is not the same as counter-evidence. Zeuli and Floden (1987), in a footnote, explicitly deny a need "to empirically demonstrate the [negative] consequences of congruency teaching" (p. 5) and appeal, instead, to common sense. Given that research does demonstrate how cultural incongruities in the classroom become obstacles to learning, there is a clear, commonsensical rationale for why and how undertaking cultural congruence in classrooms should be effective. The same cannot be said for implementing new mainstream teaching techniques in minority classrooms where, not only is there little evidence of success, but there is no self-evident reason why they should work. There have already been plenty of attempts to impose culturally incongruent teaching techniques on minority students with consistent results of alienation.

Zeuli and Floden (1987) suggest that what makes cultural congruence especially troublesome for prospective teachers is its particularistic nature. It is a common accusation against ethnographic research that it is not generalizable, and the standard reply--that it explains a lot more of the variance in what is going on in particular cases than do any generalizable variables--does not diminish problems of time, energy, and money. Each culture or subculture is unique, so the findings of incongruities in one setting cannot be directly translated to another (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987), and, indeed, "teachers will not know in advance which patterns of interaction will be prevalent in their students' communities, and which of those lead to learning difficulties" (Zeuli & Floden, 1987, p. 6). In principle, thorough ethnographic research should be undertaken for each community, and that "requires intense observation, by a trained observer, over an extended period of time" (p. 6). Obviously, under those conditions, opportunities for the necessary collaboration between ethnographers and

teachers would be so rare, so limited to extensive projects like Kamehameha, that there would be little point in teaching about cultural congruence to most prospective teachers.

By emphasizing the complexities and subtleties of their work, ethnographers, such as Heath (1983) and Erickson (1986), are caught in a double bind. If, perhaps in order to impress generally unsympathetic positivist researchers, they wish to argue for a precise, thorough, and intensive scientific methodology, if they want to stress that seeking which cultural incongruities may contribute to school failure is a mighty task, then they make it virtually impossible for teachers to practice what they preach. Luckily, the rigors of research necessary for application are often far less than those necessary to convince skeptical colleagues (and the difficulties of ethnographic research are probably overstated by its practitioners, anyway). Most of the cultural features significant for congruence in classrooms ("participation structures," ways of getting attention, modes of discourse, forms of discipline and reward, etc.) are straightforward enough for sensitive teachers to pick them up sufficiently well to make learning more comfortable in minority classrooms. It is certainly more reasonable to expect teachers, with at least a little training, to make cultural adjustments than it is to expect that from their young students. Michaels (1986) provides a straightforward example of such an adjustment by a teacher who, on being informed how her black students utilized a different form of narrative construction, immediately started to reevaluate the coherence of their work: "'You know, it's a whole lot easier to get <u>them</u> to make the connections clear, if you assume that the connections are there in the first place'" (p. 115).

Of course, prospective teachers must be taught not to confuse using knowledge of cultural incongruities to more accurately assess a minority

student's performance in an Anglo majority or multi-ethnic classroom with actually making changes in instructional and management practices to create congruence in contexts with a uniform minority culture, such as some Indian reservations and some inner city schools. Zeuli and Floden (1987), who are worried about problems with creating cultural congruence in multi-cultural settings, seem confused on this point (p. 6).

Kleinfeld (1983) fears that prospective teachers may come away from instruction in cultural congruence research with naive understandings, and fears that "anthropology has given education students a new and somewhat more sophisticated set of rationalizations for giving up" (p. 284). She cites the case of one student teacher in Alaska who took cultural difference to be the be all and end all of teaching practice with minority students, and became so overconcerned with cultural relativism that she failed to be able to teach. This is a disturbing example, but such extreme misinterpretations of cultural research are rare, and should be readily guarded against through clear instruction. Much more probable are incomplete, bumbling, or even inept attempts at culturally congruent classroom management and instruction, but no one has suggested how or why these would be especially harmful. Certainly, misuse of cultural congruence would seem far more benign than the common abuse of labelling and grouping based on misunderstandings of psychological research, and its application would seem far more plausible than that of many of the popular innovations being championed by "charismatic educational entrepreneurs" (Wilcox, 1987).

Given good instruction, there is no reason why prospective teachers cannot be intelligently trained to make a decent go of it. Ethnographers have not paid enough attention to educating teachers, and the critics of cultural congruence should be thanked for forcing them to do so. Certainly students

need to be reminded of potential pitfalls--that each situation is unique, that they shouldn't overdo it, that they need to be perceptive and flexible not prescriptive--but they also need to be given some positive advice. They need to learn how to participate in community life, preferably by living among those they are teaching. They need to learn to try not to impose rules of classroom control, reward and punishment, or communication intended for mainstream classrooms, if they appear to run into difficulties. They need to learn how to watch the ways kids organize themselves, and the ways adults in the community interact with their children. And they need to be willing to assume that students' behavior makes sense, unless they have reason to believe otherwise. Towards this end, ethnographic research can do more than help prospective teachers "become more reflective in their professional work" (Zeuli & Floden, 1987, p. 15); it can provide real nonprescripive models of the kinds of cultural incongruities they should be on the lookout for in their classrooms.

Obviously, prospective teachers can do a better job if they themselves are well taught. Rather than complaining that students misunderstand ethnographic research, Zeuli and Floden (1987) should suggest how to teach it better. Adequately training prospective teachers about cultural issues and their applications requires both opportunities to do so and knowledgeable faculty. Most courses on anthropology and education are, in fact, taught to anthropology students not prospective teachers. Few, if any, schools of education insist on courses in anthopology, linguistics, or ethnography of schooling, and such study is not usually required even for teaching minority students. If, prospective teachers get any exposure to findings about cultural incongruities at all, it is within the context of broader courses, such as "School and Society,"[10] where, in all likelihood, the instructors have

not themselves been adequately trained in ethnographic research techniques or in anthropological and linguistic theory. It is hardly any wonder they would find cultural congruence difficult to teach, or that their students would find it difficult to learn. What is really needed is collaboration between anthropologists and teacher educators to develop a good curriculum on cultural differences and their significance for prospective teachers.

Conclusion

It is hard to have a productive discussion when the discussants are talking at cross-purposes. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case with the brouhaha over cultural congruence. Ethnographers, perhaps because they have been too caught up in empirical research, in agonizing over methodology, or in talking to each other, have not provided well articulated scenarios of their subject matter, and their critics have taken advantage of this failure to blow disagreements out of proportion.

Kleinfeld (1983) and Zeuli and Floden (1987) are concerned that teachers will come to see cultural congruence as a panacea for the woes of minority education. Obviously cultural congruence is not the solution to minority school failure, and ethnographers have never claimed it to be so. It is simply an attempt to ease difficult learning situations by asking teachers to accommodate their instructional and management styles in some small ways to the cultural backgrounds of the minority students with whom they work. Cultural congruence entails neither alternative forms of schooling nor alternative modes of knowledge. The changes it calls for are rather small, not particularly radical, and well within the capabilities of most teachers.

At an abstract, philosophic level, cultural congruence clearly stands in opposition to pedagogical theories that would drive a wedge between home and school. But this opposition has a far different significance in abstract

discussion than it does for practice. Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille (1987a) insist that their intent is to "question the educational value of everyday experience for all students" (p. 491). Their argument "is not directed towards those groups whose home experience is already largely discontinuous with what is expected in schools. Rather than trying to make schooling equally familiar to all students, schooling should be made equally strange" (p. 491).

As they clearly recognize there is a danger that their argument, if misapplied,

> could work to the disadvantage of working-class and minority students who currently achieve less, on the average, in school. If providing breaks makes school more difficult for students already at a disadvantage, it might create yet another situation in which middle-class students reap the greater benefits of schooling. (Floden, Buchmann, & Schwille 1987a, p. 491)

Unfortunately, Zeuli and Floden (1987) have chosen to ignore this warning, and have applied this pedagogical philosophy precisely to those circumstances where home experience is already largely discontinuous. By taking a stance against cultural congruence, they are potentially providing an intellectual justification for those who wish to repress pluralism in schooling. In the current political atmosphere it is excuses for repression of minority voices rather than calls for creating strange learning environments for everybody that are likely to be heard.

In this philosophical discussion, it should not be forgotten that minority students have long had the supposed benefit of incongruities, but it is mainstream students who have done better in school. That schools must be "set apart" from students' home environments has an all to familiar ring in minority education. The history of American Indian education is filled with Bureau of Indian Affairs and church-sponsored schools which tore children from their families to break them of their non-Western misconceptions.

> At school it was brought home to Vera that there are really two kinds of people, Indians and whites. . . . The Indians had been really rough characters before they had become Christian. They had been pagan savages, acting in inhuman ways, not knowing how to love each other or how to pray. They weren't so bad anymore, but even baptism and church going couldn't change them overnight. Indians were like children. . . . They had to be helped by wise adults, the missionary and the teacher, to put away childish ways, Indian ways, and grow up competent in the new ways. (Vanderburgh, 1977, pp. 59-60)

Given this history, "breaking with everyday experience" for minority students can only seem another attempt by the dominant society to alienate them from their traditions. At least cultural congruence, however limited its practices, speaks to the validity and value of alternative cultural heritages. And a little equality of culture, carefully framed to open up choices and options, may enhance the possibilities for equality of opportunity. Not socially radical, not profound in scope or implication, not even of deep significance for pedagogical philosophy, cultural congruence is a small attempt to make the educational system recognize the integrity of minority points of view. And, after a long history of schools repressing minority cultures, that may make a difference.

Footnotes

[1]This paper is an outgrowth of recent discussions of cultural congruence in the College of Education at Michigan State University, centering around papers by Zeuli and Floden (1987) and Esmailka (1987). It is my own synthesis of ideas presented by many people, not all of whom I can name. I especially want to thank Douglas Campbell, David Labaree, Susan Florio-Ruane, Susan Melnick, Wendy Esmailka, Paul Ongtooguk, Donna Weinberg, Antonio Bettencourt, Cati Pellisier, Christopher Clark, Jere Brophy, Sandy Wilcox, John Zeuli, Cleo Cherryholmes, and Steve Kirsner for their comments. My title is borrowed from Fish (1971).

[2]Eliot Singer studied folklore and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently teaching fieldwork methods in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University.

[3]In a related paper, Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille (1987a) take pains to make sure their argument against "relevance" in teaching not be confused with what they regard as ethnocentric school reforms such as the Paideia Proposal (Adler, 1982). However, although Zeuli and Floden (1987) do make attempts to tone down their argument (over several revisions) with occasional asides and disclaimers, including an insistence that theirs is not a critique of cultural congruence, the force and tone of their presentation is so singularly negative that is is hard to read it as anything but advocating dismissal of culturally sensitive pedagogy.

[4]I do not wish to suggest that all studies in anthropology and education have been undertaken from this theoretical perspective. Research on microcultural differences is only a small part of anthropology and education. Erickson (1986) includes some discussion about the concept of culture in his overview of qualitative research for education. However, he is primarily concerned with methodology, and we still await a more complete discussion of the significance of different theories of culture for educational research and practice.

[5]Kleinfeld's example of native students learning dances from their Anglo teachers is not a good one, since children would be far more inclined to learn something fun than they would more mundane interactional patterns. A better example of how children can learn the rules for appropriate classroom communication, even if they choose not to enact them, is Michaels (1986) description of a black girl demonstrating a good abstract understanding of how to present at "sharing time," though she still prefers to do her own thing.

[6]The accumulated evidence seems to suggest that sometimes children are able to make easy adjustments to microcultural changes in classrooms, whereas at other times cultural differences become a serious problem. An analysis of the available data is much needed in order to assess the conditions under which differences in cultural rules for communication and social interaction become obstacles to school success. I would like to suggest the following very preliminary formulation of two such circumstances: (a) Not all microcultural norms reflect deeper cultural beliefs, but when they do, trying to change them is likely to cause difficulties. An example of this might be the reluctance of children in some American Indian groups to be singled out

from their peers--as an instance of a broader belief against individualism. (b) Even where microcultural norms are not tied to broader beliefs, differences may cause problems when there is what Althusser (1970) calls overdetermination of a contradiction. When a situation is already predisposed to conflict (e.g., when there is racial tension between a teacher and a student), minor differences that might otherwise be ignored or accommodated may become the straw that breaks the camel's back. This is probably what occurs in the "gatekeeping encounters" studied by Erickson (1979), where the potential suspicion inherent in hierarchical inter-racial meetings becomes exacerbated by differences in interactive codes of conduct.

[7]The total amount of research on cultural differences in educational settings remains small. Interested readers should consult the early collection of essays edited by Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972) and the overview by Green (1981), as well as the references in Erickson (1986).

[8]There is a long standing debate within anthropology and education over the relative significance of microcultural versus socioeconomic and political factors for minority school failure. Most of us have long believed that the different perspectives are not mutually exclusive, just differences in emphasis, a position towards which even the main antagonists seem to be moving. See Erickson (1987) and Ogbu (1987) for the latest in this debate.

[9]In trying to maintain their claim for the distinctiveness of schools in breaking with everyday experience, Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille (1987b, p. 516) pay insufficient heed to Egan's (1987) point that children already break from experience in fantasy and story. Their assertion that "story is a distinctive <u>form</u> associated with childlike imagination and oral cultures," shows a lack of familiarity with the fields of folklore and narratology, which deal seriously with stories in all manners of contexts. They ask: "Do stories lend themselves to making the transition into the structured realms of thought we call disciplines of knowledge? Are not stories one thing, and theories or proofs another?" Well . . . maybe. But certainly stories, both oral and written, have an enormous capacity to fracture and restructure concepts, and, in their own way, offer theories and, if not proofs, equally deep and coherent insights. Interpretive ability, which stories clearly foster, is at least as cognitively complex as logical or scientific thought. Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille's (1987b) comments--which they do admit need "further consideration"--suggest that they see scientific reasoning as transcendent over all other modes of thought. Given that many of today's most celebrated intellectuals have proclaimed the death of "logocentrism" (Derrida, 1976), they need to take more seriously the pedagogical significance of storytelling, not just to make "breaking with experience" more "stimulating and vivid," but as a real conceptual lever.

[10]Teacher education in Alaska as described by Kleinfeld (1983) does involve extensive cultural sensitivity training. Most schools of education, however, teach little about culture.

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